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ABSTRACT

The author points out differences between the historical-critical and the quantitative-empirical methodologies in speech communication. He proposes analysis of postpersuasive discourse as an intermediary ground encompassing these two approaches. Postpersuasive communication is conceptualized as the elements of ethos (credibility) which are separate from the verbal message but contribute to the acceptance of the message. Thus, postpersuasive messages tend to be perceived as either informational or meaningless because of their repetitive or ritualistic nature. The author discusses three situations where postpersuasive transmissions are likely to occur: dyadic, small group, and mass communication. He cites Edward T. Hall's theory of congruence as important in determining the level and verbal quality of transmissions. The author examines the nature of television news with regard to its possible postpersuasive characteristics. Finally, he maintains that communication is an interdisciplinary study, rather than a field independent of others. (Author/RN)

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TOWARD A RHETORIC OF POSTPERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION

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TOWARD A RHETORIC OF POSTPERSUASIVE COMMUNICATION

William F. Eadie*

Overheard as bits and pieces of conversation at a recent conference of speech communication scholars:

"The empiricists are going nowhere fast."

"We have the statistical sophistication to analyze the kinds of data obtainable from a 'real life' communication experiment, but we don't have scholars sophisticated enough to design such experiments."

"Rhetoricians: who needs them?"

"We need to develop an independent body of theory if we expect our discipline to survive as an academic pursuit."

Once again, as in previous gatherings, the division between the empiricists and the historians in our field was made plain. At one contributed-papers-session in communication theory, for example, the critics good-naturedly ripped each paper presented apart, and when they tired of that pursuit, they started in on the rhetoricians. Only an invasion by members with interests in "alternative theater" halted such frivolity.

The state of the field of speech communication might best be compared to the Montagues and the Capulets without any union of star-crossed lovers expected that would bring the two families together. Not only do the

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empiricists and the historians differ on methodological issues, their philosophical viewpoints are so diverse that they sometimes resort to taking potshots at one another, even in the absence of one another.

Donald Bryant, in a speech to the Speech Communication Association, attempted to demonstrate that the two sides could co-exist in one field:

> I will not presume upon your patience at this time by entering extensively into the prolific new discussion of the conflict between the socio-behavioral and the historical-critical in our professions, and on the potentials for reconciling the divergencies. Many of the young and bright among our colleagues are taking the problem seriously and the wisest of them are on the track of new jointly-found harmony.
>
> One would be silly to make believe that there is not a kind of warfare of new and old, of ancient and modern, of "science and religion" among the students of speech communication. When have there not be some good, stimulating quarrels?...Now the disagreements are more consequential and more serious and call for some mutual illumination among the specialists of both kinds. Something of the sort can be stimulated without any loss of integrity...in our national conferences on research, development, and teaching--past, present, and to come. (2:8)

Unfortunately, co-existance has proven itself to be inadequate when the two factions continue an inner struggle for control, or at least domination of the research priorities both claim exist solely for the benefit of their own methodological practices.

This paper will attempt to suggest a basis for mediating the dispute, and in doing so, the following postulates are set forth:

(1) "Communication" is interdisciplinary in approach.

(2) Because of the pervasive nature of communication, the field as such can have no independent body of theory.

(3) In order to remain viable as a separate area of research, however, speech communication scholars must attempt to synthesize theory from both an historical as well as an empirical perspective.

That communication is interdisciplinary in approach should be a matter of general agreement. In one form or another, communication is studied in

such diverse fields as psychology and engineering, anthropology and mathematics, sociology and economics. In fact, it is interesting to note that the major contributors to communication theory in the last twenty years, men such as Shannon and Weaver, Newcomb, Osgood, Hovland, and Schramm, have come from outside the field of speech communication. Even the "New Rhetoric" comes from men such as Burke and Richards, neither of whom is associated with the academic department that has traditionally studied the subject.

Because of this interdependence, the field of speech communication has not developed, and this author maintains can not develop, its own body of theory. Yet, in 1968, the New Orleans Conference on Research and Instructional Development came to the conclusion that "spoken symbolic interaction is the central focus of study in the speech communication area." (5:18) This view necessarily restricts the field to a limited and rather meaningless endeavor taken by itself. As Professor Darnell ably points out:

> Symbolic transmission is (only) one of the ways that men affect each other...Given the inevitability of error and the need for continuous reality testing, it is obvious that...the effects of symbolic transmission cannot be separated from the effects of other influences on man's behavior. It would, therefore, seem desirable (for certain purposes) to define communication as the study of the ways by which men affect each other and the interactions of those systems of influence. (3:7,15)

Communication always occurs in some context; it is therefore of relatively little consequence to study communication out of any social, cultural, political, psychological, or economic milieu. To include the context, however, one must include the body of theory encompassed by that context. In that sense, a separate communication discipline with its own, exclusive body of theory can never exist. This does not, however, mean to imply that separate academic departments devoted to the study of speech

communication should not exist; it is simply a reminder to those departments to remain cognizant to the related research going on elsewhere.

Keeping the above perspective in mind, the conflict between the historical and the empirical methodologists becomes relative unimportant. Rather than co-existance, a unification of the two methods for a single purpose would serve to strengthen the position of both. It is toward one example of a synthesis of rhetorical theory and communication theory that this paper will proceed.

Despite the demands of the dramaturgical approach placed on the field by the "New Rhetoric," Aristotle's definition of rhetoric as "discovering the possible means of persuasion," is still accepted by many, including this author. Communication, on the other hand, to some seems to imply a wider purview than rhetoric, and if Darnell's definition cited above is acceptable, communication may be said to deal with the transmission and reception of all sorts of messages, both of a persuasive and of a non-persuasive nature. Thus, in this sense rhetoric may be placed within the wider bounds of communication.

When Aristotle wrote his Rhetoric, he postulated three contexts of persuasive discourse: deliberative, forensic, and epideictic. In all three contexts, a single speaker was seeking to persuade a specific audience in some manner. The Rhetoric was a document designed to aid the speaker by introducing to him purposes to which he might speak as well as methods of proof that he might employ. Translated into terms of communication theory, a rhetoric might be used to discover the purposes and methods of any form of communication. Admittedly such a definition must be classified as arbitrary, but in terms of this writer's experience

at least, such a statement is plausible. It may be hoped that this plausibility will not be limited to the author.

Rhetorics based on persuasive assume that the ideational component of the message to be transmitted has not been accepted by the audience. Aristotle outlined three methods of persuasive proof: ethos, pathos, and logos. Of these, pathos and logos are generally assumed to be message-oriented in character, while ethos is thought to be speaker-oriented in nature. Although considerable research has been done on the concept of ethos (translated as "source credibility" in communication theory), it remains a relatively unknown entity, albeit recognized as a powerful force. Rosenthal (7), whose previous work has concentrated on theoretical considerations of ethos, has suggested a new name, paramessage, for the concept. The paramessage elements of communication include all factors perceived in the sender not related to the message itself; such elements, maintains Rosenthal, may well be more "persuasive" in force than the combination of verbal symbols or message elements transmitted.

If Rosenthal's analysis can be accepted as correct, situations could be easily visualized wherein the paramessage elements present could persuade the listener prior to the transmission of any spoken message. In such cases, the message elements would be perceived by the receiver as postpersuasive in nature. The suggestion here that a postpersuasive stage of communication exists is not designed to deny the fluidity of the persuasion process; indeed, the basic criterion for postpersuasive communication is that it is to be perceived as such by the receiver. Once such perception ceases on the part of the receiver, the process of persuasion will resume operation. The balance of this paper will provide a

framework for the construction of a rhetoric of postpersuasive communication.

Although Aristotle focused on the relationship between a speaker and a specific audience (the public-speaking situation), prior persuasion is most likely to have taken place within the context of three other communication situations: dyadic communication, small group communication, and mass communication. Each shall be considered separately here in terms of both purposes and methods of communication.

The most common form of postpersuasive communication occurs in the dyad. In a developmental sense all of us have acquired our knowledge of communication behavior through dyadic interaction. As children, we cried and either our mother or our father came to see what was wrong. As we grew older and went to school, we had many casual acquaintances, but we usually acquired one special friend to whom we could talk easily. Friendships resolved into dating patterns and later into marriage. In other words, the most frequent form of communication is dyadic, because we have communicated with others in this mode since birth.

The purpose of most dyadic communication appears to be to meet one or more of a heirarchy of needs, not the least of which is a need for human contact. As a result, postpersuasive communication in a dyadic situation tends to be either informative or meaningless in nature.

Informative communication may take the form of a short expression of a single thought, or it may be a rambling commentary involving a series of thoughts and verbalized emotions. The idea of congruence, as discussed by Hall in <u>The Silent Language</u>, is especially important in this type of

encounter. Hall writes:

> Congruence is what all writers are trying to achieve in terms of their own style, and what everyone wants to find as he moves through life. On the highest level the human reaction to congruence is one of awe or ecstasy. Complete congruence is rare. One might say that it exists when an individual makes full use of all the potentials in a pattern. (4:124)

In a dyad, persuasion may occur with a minimum amount of congruence. The relationship between the partners tends to include more postpersuasive situations as the amount of congruence increases. As the dyad approaches congruence, then, information-passing tends to become more nonverbal than verbal; what is left unsaid is greater than what is spoken. Complete congruence would probably culminate in silent ecstasy.

Postpersuasive communication in dyads on a lower level of congruence tends to be more meaningless than informative in nature. Communication becomes meaningless in one of two fashions, either through repetition or through ritualization.

Loss of meaning through repetition tends to occur most often in a situation where a person of recognized authority or competence is put in a position where a message is transmitted repeatedly. Any employee who must meet the public on a regular basis encounters this problem. An airline clerk can eventually give out a flight schedule without thinking, even though he or she might be cognizant that to the receiver the message being transmitted is meaningful. A foreman who continually is pressured by his superiors into reprimanding his workers for minor transgressions will soon adopt a "care less" attitude and repeat his warnings haphazardly. In any case, a repetitive message tends to be of a nonpersonal nature and might well be transmitted mechanically or with a negative attitude that would be perceived easily by the receiver. Some organizations, such as

movie theaters, have installed a tape-recorded message on a phone line; the message contains information that is in constant demand, and in such a manner all elements of transmission can be kept constant.

Loss of meaning through ritualization occurs when repetition of a message has been so great that the message becomes part of the cultural pattern. When another person is met on the street, a frequent greeting includes, "How are you?" "Fine, how are you?" is the expected reply to this communication, but the real message lies in the cultural context of the traditional greeting, thus making the spoken message meaningless. In fact, the absence of the expected reply would have more meaning than the reply itself. In other words, the reply, "Fine, how are you?" will probably be given in most cases even if the individual replying is feeling terrible, and even if he has no interest whatsoever in how his greeter feels. As with any repetitive communication, the message tends to be nonpersonal; as congruence increases, the need to reply in a culturally-accepted fashion decreases. Thus, meeting a close friend on the street, one might disclose that he had a splitting headache to the question, "How are you?", while a third person joining the group might get the response, "Fine, how are you?" to the same question.

In the small group, postpersuasive communication is not nearly as common as in the dyad. Generally, such communication will occur in relatively informal or unstructured groups such as a "bull" session or an encounter group. The content of the messages themselves can be measured on a bipolar continuum with one end being labeled "cognitive" and the other end being labeled "emotive." Transmissions more cognitive in nature will be of an informative type and will usually take the form of lengthy and rambling statements of position. According to Rogers (6), transmissions

more emotive in nature will deal with the feeling state of the individual with relation to the group at the moment of transmission or with reference to past experiences. As a group history builds, emotive transmissions will tend to outnumber cognitive transmissions in terms of general classes on either side of the neutral point of the continuum. The build-up of emotive transmissions will normally lead to group catharsis. On the other hand, as the task-orientation of the group increases, the messages transmitted will tend to become more persuasive in character. A business staff meeting may contain transmissions of an informative nature, but such transmissions will be viewed by the receivers as part of an overall persuasive strategy for acceptance of the sender or his point of view by the group, with the specific program presented relegated to a minor role in the proceedings.

Of the three contexts, mass communication becomes the most difficult to discuss because the raison d'etre of the verbal commercial media in this country is persuasion. Consequently, programming is based on its entertainment value with respect to drawing a mass audience to receive the advertiser's messages. One aspect of media programming, television news, has achieved postpersuasive status with some viewers, however, and the result of this achievement has caused Vice President Agnew and others to react with alarm.

Unlike other television programming, newscasts come closer to achieving interaction with the viewer. In imitating a dyadic communication situation, the viewer is lulled into a false sense of congruence with the newscaster. Because a particular television newsman has been, in a sense, "invited into the home" of the viewer, his message will tend to be accepted as pure information and believed as such.

For his part, the newscaster feels no such false congruence. Because he is operating in a one-way medium, the newscaster tends to regard himself in the manner of Westley and Maclean's gatekeeper (8), passing on what is given to him, while editing only for purposes of time limits and listener interests. On occasion, however, he may step out of this role and deliver his own commentary on the events he has reported. Because of the congruity the viewer feels with the newscaster, the former may neglect to notice the difference between the nonpersuasive and the persuasive messages being transmitted. While, despite Agnew's protestations, there is probably no "conspiracy to manage" television news, the criticisms Agnew has leveled have served to draw attention to the nature of news programming practices, causing the networks to become more aware of labeling commentary as well as causing viewers to become more critical about accepting what they receive.

Returning to traditional rhetoric's focus on a speaker and a specific audience, it has been this author's nonempirical observation as both a member and a teacher of public-speaking courses that the students in such courses tend to become a more tightly-knit group than in courses offered outside the area of speech communication. Speaking in a persuasive situation to a group is a highly unnatural experience for most students, and thus a high level of anxiety is generally produced by such a task. While retaining the focus on persuasive communication, it may be possible to lower anxiety levels by producing a postpersuasive state on the para-message level prior to any "public speaking" assignment being executed. If the students can learn to accept each other as individuals through the use of "human-relations training" or other appropriate techniques, the

rate of adaptation to the unfamiliar situation required of them by such a course might be raised considerably. Once the initial high level of anxiety is overcome, the students will find that they adapt quickly to the speaker-audience situation, and that they can concentrate their learning on the persuasive techniques such a situation requires.

In summary, then, it has been the purpose of this paper to attempt to mediate the dispute between the rhetoricians and the behaviorists in the field of speech communication by suggesting a synthetic framework derived from the work of both groups. Because of the traditional focus of communication research on persuasion, it was suggested that one realm left to be studied was that of postpersuasive discourse. Postpersuasive communication was seen as a part of the process of persuasion, a state characterized by being perceived as such by the receiver. Three communication contextual situations where postpersuasive transmissions were likely to occur were discussed in depth. It was postulated that such discourse exists and can be measured on a bipolar cognitive-emotive continuum. Postpersuasive messages tend to be perceived as informational; if not, such content might well be perceived as meaningless either by repetition or by ritualization. It was further speculated that the theory of congruence as set forth by Hall plays an important role in determining the level and verbal quality of transmissions. Television news was discussed as to its possible post-persuasive nature, and a conceivable application to teaching public address was put forth. Finally, communication was maintained as interdisciplinary in nature; as the theory stated in this paper can be seen only in terms of the author's own experiences, there will doubtless be those who will disagree with its content. It is hoped, however, that the underlying rationale for this paper will stimulate further discussion and research.

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